

LIFE 8/7/64

The Right Kind of Uncle Tom

I am beginning to wonder about the label "Uncle Tom." It has been used until quite recently by Negroes to describe other Negroes guilty of slavishness in their demeanor toward whites and especially toward white authority. Now Uncle Tom has taken on a new, far more inclusive meaning. Apparently the term can be applied to any Negro who counsels caution, any who tries to cool the temper of the mob, any who tries to suggest that there is a workable measure of good will toward the Negro cause in the white community, any, in effect, who seeks to persuade his people that progress and justice can be achieved in lawful and orderly protest. It has become increasingly difficult for a Negro leader of any recognizable stature to avoid being called an Uncle Tom.

Take Bayard Rustin, for example. He is an ex-Communist, a pacifist who spent time in federal prison for draft evasion, a man whose political past would not lead anyone to think that he would ever be guilty of the crime of accommodation to the powers that be. More than that, Rustin has long been an adviser to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and was responsible for much of the planning for last summer's enormously dramatic and successful March on Washington. Yet when, during the recent riots in Harlem, Rustin got in a sound truck and begged the rioters to go home, the truck was bombarded with hostiles and Rustin was angrily booed as an Uncle Tom.

In an interview last week, James Farmer, the national director of CORE, said, "If an individual is waging a militant struggle, he won't be called an Uncle Tom—if Negroes are convinced he is concerned about their interests rather

than his own." But Farmer, who certainly qualifies as a militant rights leader by most standards, has himself been on the receiving end of the epithet many times. And in the Harlem riots he appeared to be at excruciating pains to avoid being called it again. When he took to the streets, presumably by way of convincing the mob that he was concerned about their interests, he advised groups he met that he had seen a white policeman draw his revolver and shoot a Negro woman in the groin. If such an instance of wanton brutality occurred, the victim never showed up in a hospital, though a woman did who had been hit in the thigh by a ricocheting bullet. Farmer insisted later that his statements during the riot had not been inflammatory exaggerations. "Only one side of the picture was getting across," he said, "a bad picture of Negroes throwing bricks and bottles. I wanted to show that the fault was mutual. I don't consider a statement of fact as being provocative. Should I conceal the fact that a woman was shot?"

The way Mr. Farmer put the question, the answer was obviously no. Yet I would suggest that in his zeal to present the other side of the picture he wound up somehow obscuring the justice of his own cause. He escaped the dread label of Uncle Tom, but he put into question, at a time with truly dangerous possibilities, the responsibility of Negro leadership. Assuming, that is, that the responsibility of this leadership extends to the American community at large, as well as to the Negro segment of it.

A lot of people, white and Negro, will say that the sympathy and understanding of the community are immaterial, that such intangibles—if, in fact, they exist at all—are useless allies to the cause, that the revolution must be won without them. There are certainly grounds for such bitter arguments. For if the recent rioting has illuminated anything, it has illuminated the fact that desperate people, trapped with no hope in their ghettos, are beyond listening to promises they've heard so many times before. It is this fact which accounts for the precariousness of Negro leadership, especially in the North: on the critical questions of more job opportunities, better

housing, fully integrated school systems, the established leaders have not been able to deliver, and numbers of oppressed people might prefer to listen to the riot-mongers who preach hatred for "Whitey." There can be no doubt that "Whitey," if this uncomfortable label can be applied to the whole white community, holds primary blame for the delays which have now brought disorder.

But the Negro leadership, too, must share some of the blame. A certain amount of hell-raising demagoguery has helped whip this long, hot summer into life. Much of the difficulty, of course, arises from the enormous proliferation of rights organizations as the struggle has increased in intensity. The aims of many of these are in conflict with the aims of many others, and there is brisk competition for membership and funds. After the Harlem riots, for example, no less than 69 groups in that community alone got together to form a committee to present grievances to the authorities. The possibilities for destructive confusion in such a situation are endless.

If the riots gave us a look at the raw truth of the problem, they also served to unite important elements of Negro leadership in a most welcome and constructive change of tactics. It will be quickly pointed out that the decision last week of the leaders of four major rights groups to call for "a broad curtailment, if not total moratorium" of all mass protests until after election day is a political move calculated to head off any increase in backlash benefits for Senator Barry Goldwater. And there will undoubtedly be strong dissents from the move by other Negro groups.

I hope the implications of this new tactic go beyond national politics. I hope this means that the Negro leaders have reached the point in the evolution of protest where they are willing to risk being called Uncle Toms, as they surely now will be, if that means they advocate and demand the persistent, peaceable quest for equality.